

Wrestling Observer Newsletter

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In the next of our Hall of Fame profiles, we look at Roy Shire.

ROY SHIRE - A former wrestling star, Roy Shire was one of the world's top pro wrestling promoters of the 60s and 70s, and turned the Cow Palace in San Francisco into a world-famous wrestling arena.

Shire, whose greatest fame as a wrestler came in the late 50s as part of the Shire Brothers tag team with younger "brother" Ray Shire (Carl Raymond Stevens), came with Jim Barnett's business partner, Johnny Doyle, to San Francisco in 1960 to establish a promotion that would go against aging NWA promoter and 1920s wrestling star Joe Malciewicz. The war was one-sided. Shire had a strong television time slot, creative booking and he came in during a period of weakness in the NWA which enabled him to bring the top talent in the country even against an established NWA promoter. He finished Malciewicz's promotion in about a year.

Using his former wrestling brother, billed as "The Blonde Bomber" Ray Stevens ("The Crippler" nickname for Stevens came from Verne Gagne in 1971 and was never used in San Francisco until Stevens came in during the 80s on the AWA shows) as his top star, San Francisco was pro wrestling's largest grossing city at times during the early 60s. His peak of business was in 1962 when he ran 15 live events at the Cow Palace and averaged 13,118 paid. Stevens, who was injured for several months that year, headlined eight of those shows, drawing an average attendance of 15,401. The capacity for the building at the time was 14,706.

The success of the Cow Palace in the early 60s was always attributed to both the promoter and his top star. Shire was a booking genius, whose ability to logically progress programs, transition into new programs, fine tune and detail interviews and storylines and create stars and champions who could draw, ranked with anyone in wrestling during his era. Even though as a person he was largely despised, even his worst critics would never knock his ability to promote wrestling.

Bill Watts described Shire as the opposite of Verne Gagne. He said Gagne was very good with the big picture, but not a good detail-man. He said Shire was so into the details of everything coming across exactly how he wanted that it sometimes got in the way of the more important big picture. Shire was probably the most similar in that sense to Vince McMahon. He was the only promoter of his era who would tell wrestlers, word-for-word, what he wanted them to say in their promos. Now there was a difference. He only did that for wrestlers who he felt needed the help. He didn't do it for the stars who he felt were good on promos. Shire was also the origin of Watts' mentality when he was running a territory regarding being strict about faces and heels not socializing together in public. Once, Watts, who was a babyface, and Stevens, a heel, went out carousing together. Now, Stevens understood where his bread was buttered, and if they were going to go out together, they went to Los Angeles to do it which was out of the territory. Still, somehow Shire found out and fined both of them.

Stevens was considered by many as the best in-ring performer of the era, as well as being a strong heel interview. Although only 5-9, starting as a junior heavyweight at the age of 15, and in his prime he was a stocky 230 pounds (he got heavier as he aged) with a huge neck, Stevens, the little boy in a man's body who never grew up, had the ability to project being a great street fighter. He looked like a star, and was a prodigy in the ring, similar to Terry Gordy or Katsuhiko Nakajima. Despite being nobody's son, not having any kind of a great sports background which was so important in being pushed in that era,

not being very big, nor having any kind of an outstanding physique, he had a feel for the ring that his contemporaries still talk about with awe. At 17, he was already working on top in a major feud with Gorgeous George. At 20, he was world junior heavyweight champion. Shire billed Stevens from New York (he was born in Point Pleasant, WV, and grew up in Columbus, OH), and got over because he would constantly knock everything about San Francisco, which nobody had ever done. Stevens was a high school dropout who lived for his toys and for speed. But he was the life of the party when interacting with the intellectual elite, such as professors, at Stanford University parties, where he'd go with long-time friend and tag team partner Don Manoukian, a former Stanford football star who later became a multi-millionaire real estate tycoon in Nevada. He was the best bump taker in the business. He originated the flip-into-the-turnbuckles bump that Ric Flair made famous, and did it faster, harder and more believable than either Flair or Shawn Michaels.

Flair will readily admit that Stevens, his favorite wrestler growing up, was the guy he patterned himself after. Stevens would work with television job guys and sell so believably for them that he made them look like the best worker in the business. That's where Flair's pattern of selling so much for everyone came from. One night when Stevens didn't take the flip into the turnbuckles bump it disappointed Flair so much that he vowed when he was on top, that in every match, he had to give the paying audience his well known signature spots, including that bump (until he was too old to pull it off). Even though Flair was a master at making opponents look better than they were and carrying stiffs to good matches, his selling never had the gritty, realistic feel of Stevens. Nevertheless, as someone who saw both as much as almost anyone, Flair's top matches in the 80s were significantly better than any of Stevens' matches of the 70s.

"Ray did a lot of crazy things, some you could print and some you couldn't," said Walt Harris, who was Shire's television announcer during the 60s. "He had a tag team partner who was gay and we talked on the air how a wrestler had just gotten married in the ring in Hawaii. We were always in competition with Hawaii (at the time Shire supplied the wrestlers to the Honolulu office and his tape played there with local wrap-arounds and interviews) to see who could draw the biggest crowd. Stevens immediately said that he could guarantee his partner would never get married in a wrestling ring."

Shire was the major booking influence on Pat Patterson, who was probably the second biggest star in the territory's history. Patterson came to San Francisco in 1965 and was quickly made the tag team partner of Stevens. Later he became his top rival. Then he ended up with the same position Stevens had as top babyface for years. Patterson was Vince McMahon's assistant in booking during his rise to fame. Shire also had major impact on Bill Watts learning to book, as Watts always credited Shire, Gagne and Eddie Graham as the people he learned the most from.

Although he never used the concept, the most lasting tribute to Shire and reminder of his legacy comes every January with the Royal Rumble, a concept Patterson came up with, inspired by Shire's biggest event held every year in late January. The annual Cow Palace Battle Royal, held from 1972 (Shire actually did his first three Battle Royals from 1967-69 in mid-November, which later became the time frame for the annual Sacramento Battle Royal) until Shire's final event in 1981, which sold out most years, was the most hotly anticipated area events each year. Unlike most Battle Royals which were short matches that guys goofed around in and were largely terrible, Shire created an aura

around the event to where it was a night where people who would never attend wrestling would be lured to the show.

Shire's promotion of the gimmick was so strong, that for years after his promotion folded, Battle Royals were the biggest drawing gimmick match in the Bay Area when used on AWA, Crockett Promotions or WWF events in the market. In fact, the legacy of the Battle Royal was so strong that in 1987, long after the AWA had stopped drawing everywhere, they booked a Battle Royal at the Cow Palace and still drew 9,000 fans—the last big crowd in the history of the promotion. By that point they were usually drawing less than 1,500 per show.

Shire would push it as the biggest one-night money prize a wrestler could earn in the business, a lottery where there was a \$500 entry fee and the \$2,000 he put up from the gate receipts, and the prestige and \$11,000 winning payoff meant every major star in the country wanted in. The money figure was enough that it was significant for the time, but not so much that the public would dismiss it as the bullshit it really was.

Every element was sold big, such as how important the money was, noting that many wrestlers didn't even earn that much money in a year. Every wrestler in their interviews would talk about what they would do with their winnings. Japanese wrestlers like Kinji Shibuya and Masa Saito were always talking about buying lots of taking the American dollars, converting them to yen, and buying rice fields in Japan. The Von Brauners would talk about using the money to open up a college to teach Nazi teachings to people in the Bay Area. The babyfaces would talk about possible charitable contributions, particularly the ethnic stars talking about helping out people in their home land. It was hyped that winning the Battle Royal was equivalent to winning the world title in wrestling or boxing. It was pushed how having the member of a minority group win the Battle Royal would be a source of cultural pride.

Unlike most Battle Royals of the era, the California Battle Royals allowed pins and submission finishes, along with the over-the-top rope eliminations. It allowed for strong finishes, where a challenger could get a win over a champion, or just where a winner would come out stronger because he pinned a top guy at the end, as opposed to the usual side step and the other guy flies over the top type of finish. It also allowed for the Haystacks Calhoun/Andre the Giant big splash pile-up spot which was a fixture of a Shire Battle Royal, with the guy on the bottom carried out on a stretcher and announced as having broken his ribs.

Plus, by winning the Battle Royal, it was a lock that you become the No. 1 contender for the United States championship. Usually plenty of new angles were set up. Because it was billed as the most dangerous match in wrestling, there would be two or three brutal injuries. Just lasting until the final four would be considered huge. New stars were made every year. With the injuries, including the annual spot where the "giant," whether it be Andre the Giant, Man Mountain Mike, Haystacks Calhoun or Chris Taylor would deliver a big splash, leading to a pile-up, and the wrestler on the bottom would be carried out on a stretcher and announced as having broken ribs. Someone or two would be leaving the territory on a stretcher. A new top contender would arise and new feuds would start based on eliminations.

Each week announcer Hank Renner, a notable Sacramento figure in the boxing and horse racing community, would announce that Shire had accepted anywhere from three to six new applications from the hundreds sent in from around the country. Each week they'd announce a few local stars and some stars from out of the territory. In a promotion where lines between faces and heels were pretty strict except in prelims, and faces almost never fought faces and heels never fought heels, the Battle Royal was the exception. There was a no collusion rule, so in interviews, tag team partners would cut promos

on each other and nearly get into it with the pressure of the big event coming.

Battle Royals in their heyday lasted 25 to 40 minutes. Most of the ones in the early 70s were classic, except the 1977 version where it was clear Shire had hit the booking wall (this was before Bob Roop came in as booker) and Andre the Giant won a match that went 18 minutes, and led to no angles going forward.

But in 1978, Shire was revitalized, and needed to be, after firing his booker and top draws when getting word they were looking to steal the territory from him. Having to rebuild, he brought back Don Muraco, by that point one of the best workers in the business. Muraco had several stints in the territory, starting as a mid-level babyface in his second full-time territory as a star. After leaving, Muraco hit it huge in Florida as a Ricky Steamboat-like babyface pushed as the next coming of Jack Brisco. Because of his looks and athletic ability, Muraco was figured to be a career babyface.

It was Shire who booked Muraco's first heel turn, in 1975, on Patterson, leading to arguably the best Cow Palace match of the 70s. It was a most falls in one hour match that ended in 3-3 tie and went seven minutes into a sudden death overtime with Patterson winning via a memorable count out. Both men were drenched in sweat because they worked a pace rarely seen in those days for a long match, and it was part of the storyline as they continued to slip out of each man's finisher, the spinning toe hold and the figure four leglock. Patterson had knocked Muraco out of the ring and then Muraco pulled Patterson out. However, the ref's 20 count started three seconds earlier on Muraco, who was out first. Muraco had Patterson on the floor in a spinning toe hold, when the ref hit 20, which everyone figured to be a double count out leading to an eighth fall.

When Muraco came back in 1978, he was one of the top heels in the business and of world championship caliber. He used a loaded elbow pad and destroyed Moondog Mayne, by this point a babyface, who bled profusely. It was the single worst beating Mayne had ever taken at the Cow Palace and onlookers were stunned that when Mayne "tasted his own blood," the normal Shire pattern for a comeback, there was no comeback. Muraco toyed with him, kept picking him up at two, before finally pinning him. Muraco followed it up by beating Dory Funk Jr. in what was probably the best technically wrestled main event in the arena in years. The night Muraco won the Battle Royal and beat Dory Funk was probably best remembered because it was his last sellout.

But while the Cow Palace Battle Royal was one of the biggest events in wrestling worldwide during the 70s and what the territory was most famous for, it was a concept developed well into the run and had nothing to do with the building of the territory.

The Pacific Coast Athletic Association was originally started by Shire and Johnny Doyle in 1960. Doyle was Jim Barnett's partner in what was the country's biggest wrestling territory at the time, based in Indianapolis. Barnett knew both Jim Wesson, the owner of Gateway Chevrolet in San Francisco, as well as the management of KTVU-TV, Ch. 2, based in Oakland. KTVU-TV was a fledgling independent station that began operations in 1958 and was put on the map by airing Bay Bombers Roller Derby games in prime time on Sunday nights. Barnett saw that Shire was clearly a step above most of the wrestlers when it came to understanding booking and promoting. He felt Shire had the mind and savvy to make it work, and in exchange Barnett was to get a booking fee for getting Shire international talent. Barnett noted that unlike Wilbur Snyder and Dick the Bruiser, who he claimed essentially stole the Indianapolis territory from him, first bullying him to become partners, and then just taking over when he went to Australia, that Shire always paid him what was agreed upon on those early years. Shire later bought Doyle out when he and Barnett went to Australia in 1964.

Roy Shropshire was born January 1, 1921, in Georgetown, KY, but grew up in Hammond, IN. He always claimed to have been a college wrestler and Business Administration graduate of Northwestern University, but there is no verification if that's true. He also claimed to have been an AAU champion in wrestling, but that can't be authenticated. He did wrestle in the U.S. Navy during World War II, and he was an avid weightlifter. He was only 5-6 and weighed 205 pounds, and was already 29 when he tried to get into the business at Al Haft's gym in Columbus, OH. But when he stripped down, they were impressed with his physique. When working with the pros, it was clear he could really wrestle. Stevens, who was 15, was also training in the same gym.

With his name immediately changed to Roy Shire (although he was often referred to as Roy Shires), he was making decent money in one of the best paying territories during a hot period for the business due to it being on network television. When Haft saw Shire reading textbooks all the time, Haft suggested the idea of him becoming Professor Roy Shire, going into the ring with a gown and mortarboard. Immediately upon seeing how it got over, Haft made Shire his world junior heavyweight champion even though he had only been in the business barely one year.

Shire headlined throughout the 50s in the Northeast, Ohio, Texas and in Barnett's large national territory. During his career, he held Haft's version of the world junior heavyweight title twice, the North American heavyweight title (the top heavyweight title in the Amarillo territory, where he feuded on top with area legend Dory Funk Sr.) the Southwest junior heavyweight title twice, the Southwest tag team title, Texas tag team title, and had two runs as Barnett's world tag team champion in the brother team which worked all over the country.

Shire was also the regular tag team partner with Dr. Jerry Graham in New York in 1957, including selling out Madison Square Garden on November 2, 1957, for his one main event against Argentina Rocca & Miguel Perez.

In 1959, The Shire Brothers, even more than the Graham Brothers, were the top drawing heel tag team in the business, and the No. 2 drawing tag team in wrestling, behind Rocca & Perez. Barnett had Indianapolis rolling and in November and December of that year, they drew three crowds in the range of 13,000 fans for two title defenses against Dick the Bruiser & Yukon Eric and another against the Cowboy & Indian team of Cowboy Bob Ellis & Don Eagle.

They won the NWA world tag team titles from Bruiser & Angelo Poffo on August 16 1959, in Indianapolis, losing them on February 11, 1960, to Bruiser & Gene Kiniski. Even though Shire and Doyle had already opened up the San Francisco office and had the television running, and it was well known Stevens was going to San Francisco to be the star, The Shire Brothers got a second run with the belts, at this point known as the AWA world tag team championships. They beat Kiniski & Bruiser on November 5, 1960, before losing on February 9, 1961 to Red & Lou Bastien (Lou Klein, who was billed as Red's half brother at the time), which was right at the point Shire retired as an active wrestler.

Although the Shire Brothers were working main events at the time the deal opened up, Roy was in his late 30s and had a bad knee from when he was headlining in Texas, and never could take time off to get it. And he had \$25,000 saved up to invest in the new company. Even though an accomplished and successful main event heel and one of the better promos of his time, Shire never wrestled on his own shows until 1978, when the territory was down after Shire fired his two top stars. At the age of 57, Shire & Dean Ho wrestled several main events against Muraco & Sir Earl Maynard (who in a trivia note, finished second to Larry Scott in the very first Mr. Olympia contest). But his

former wrestling background was regularly emphasized on his television show.

He did a feud outside the ring, managing Rocky Johnson, in 1973, when Johnson was battling Paul DeMarco, managed by Haru Sasaki. He and Sasaki went at it at ringside, had a feud, but never had a match.

Shire had himself pushed on television as not "The Dirtiest Player in the Game," but "The man who invented breaking the rules, and taught Ray Stevens." At 5-6, looking tiny next to his wrestlers, he'd do interviews like he was a badass a foot taller, with his catch phrase, "Don't let these gray hairs fool you."

He bullied most everyone he came into contact with, not so much physically, but with his power, success and money.

Airing on Friday nights at 9 p.m., National All-Star Wrestling on Ch. 2 in San Francisco originally used tapes of stars from other territories, actually similar to the concept Vince McMahon used for All-American Wrestling in 1983 on the USA Network, except he didn't have his own stable. He hired Bill Welch, who was something of a national celebrity as the host of "Divorce Court," and a play-by-play man for network college football, as his first announcer, getting such a big name by offering him a percentage of the houses so he'd try extra hard to promote the shows. Stevens was billed as the United States champion on these tapes sent in, said to have won it from Bobo Brazil in Detroit. Shire somehow got possession of the United States heavyweight title belt that Fred Kohler used when he had national television on the Dumont Network, which was one of the big four networks of the era, that was created for Verne Gagne.

The belt originated when Kohler had a falling out with the NWA because they allowed world champion Lou Thesz to work for a rival promoter in Chicago. Kohler, who had the strongest television exposure in the alliance, didn't quit the NWA, but stopped booking Thesz, and instead built his television around Gagne, as United States champion, as the top star. Kohler booked Gagne nationally as champion with similar terms as the NWA booked Thesz, with Kohler and Gagne getting 10% of the gate on his out dates. When Barnett opened up his promotion in Detroit in 1959, he brought in Angelo Poffo with the very modest belt with the two U.S. flags on it that had some historic value since it was the belt that had been featured on national TV. Detroit must have gotten a different belt shortly thereafter, as Shire got the belt when he started, and used that same belt until he closed up shop.

In mid-January of 1961, instead of airing tapes highlighting the big stars like he was going to feature like Stevens, Bruiser, Snyder, Ellis and Brazil, Shire started doing live shows from the KTVU-TV studios in Oakland. It was in studio, before he opened up, where Ellis beat Stevens for the title. Shire booked the Cow Palace for the debut show on March 4, 1961. But few remember Welch, who didn't last very long. During almost the entire period of National All-Star Wrestling, Walt Harris, the voice of Roller Derby, an exceptional sports broadcaster and producer, was the host.

"They came here together," remembered Harris. "He (Stevens) was Shire's meal ticket because he could do amazing things in the ring. The fans loved him. They loved him even when they hated him. We ran a popularity contest in '61 or '62 for the fans to vote in, and it shocked everyone when he won it, because when we'd go to the arenas, everyone would boo him."

It was a shocker that in 1962, the year the promotion peaked, when they did a major voting off KTVU, for both the most popular and most hated wrestler. Stevens was expected to win as the most hated, which he did. Nobody expected he would win as most popular.

As Shire started running local television live on Friday nights, he made plans for his first event. He went to the Cow Palace. The owners of the arena couldn't believe someone would book the Cow Palace for pro wrestling. At the time, Malciewicz was running at the San Francisco Civic Auditorium which held 6,000 fans. Wrestling was drawing between 2,000 to 4,500 per show. There was a famous conversation when he went to the arena and booked the first date, and management asked him what he thought he would draw.

"What's the place seat?" Shire asked. They told him capacity at the time was 14,706 (the building was modernized years ago and capacity is just over 13,000 now, and when Eddie Guerrero beat Brock Lesnar on February 15, 2004, to win the World title in the last ever sellout of the arena, with the stage and such, there were only 9,000 paid and less than 11,000 in the building), and at the time it was one of the largest arenas in the country. "We'll fill it." And they laughed, "Not in this city with wrestling."

Sure, Lou Thesz and Leo Nomellini drew the largest wrestling crowd in the U.S. in both 1953 and 1955 with their Cow Palace matches, but that was when those matches were covered by the local media as the biggest thing on the local sports scene. The storyline of the world champion against the local sports hero with the storyline being that if Nomellini won the title, the 49ers would be without their best player for the next season made wrestling the talk of the city at the time of those matches.

Shire's first show drew 16,553 fans, with nearly 2,000 standing room tickets sold, and they had to turn away another 6,000 at the door. It was night that people talked about in the Bay Area even 40 years later and is probably one of the two or three most remembered shows he ever promoted. In fact, when the Strikeforce debut show sold out the HP Pavilion in San Jose, older wrestling fans at the show seeing the traffic jam and all the people turned away in front of the arena compared it to Shire's first show 45 years earlier. Shire and Doyle made their entire investment back on that first card, and it wasn't long before promoting wrestling had made Shire a millionaire, at that time when being a millionaire meant a lot more than it does today. His later real estate and ranching investments made him a multi-millionaire.

The first show featured a triple main event of Argentina Rocca vs. Don Leo Jonathan, U.S. champion Ellis vs. Stevens and Bill Melby vs. Mitsu Arakawa.

Shire claimed it was the latter of the three matches that drew the first house, based on his first television angle. Melby was a bodybuilder from Salt Lake City, a friend of Shire who had pretty much retired as a wrestler. He had placed third in the 1949 Mr. America contest before being part of a pack of well-known Southern California-based bodybuilders who came into pro wrestling. He was known particularly for having great abs. Shire was familiar with Arakawa because they worked together in Barnett's circuit. He was a Hawaiian who played the stereotypical Japanese heel. Once they started running television, Arakawa was featured, using the stomach claw as his finisher. The hold was put over strong and Arakawa was made into the supreme heel. He would win with the move, put it on two or three times after the match, and every opponent went out on a stretcher.

Melby's gimmick, which ironically was remembered far better a year later when Pepper Gomez, another former bodybuilding star turned wrestler, came in, was having the "cast-iron stomach." Guys would punch his stomach. He'd no sell the spot, and flex his abs. On the fourth week, Melby cut a promo on Arakawa abusing jobbers and said if he does that again next week, there is going to be trouble. Of course, Arakawa did it again, this time putting the stomach claw on someone on the floor right in front of the TV cameras. Out from the back came Melby. Melby attacked Arakawa, who got in the ring, but Arakawa made the comeback, and put Melby in the stomach claw. Shire

ordered the camera to zoom in close as Melby started flexing his abs and was no selling the killer move. Arakawa freaked out, psyched himself up, and put the hold on stronger. Again, Melby no sold it. Melby made a comeback and Arakawa ran.

Shire was a great promo and often before one of the big matches of the year, Shire would do promos for the babyface that would get the match over better than the babyface himself would. In fact of all the promos done on a national basis for the Muhammad Ali vs. Antonio Inoki match, Shire's promo, for Inoki, on Ali, was easily the most effective. He did on rare occasions over the years, but his first time was for this show, when he said he's known Arakawa for years and Arakawa had never run from anyone, and announced he was changing the card (they had been advertising Ellis vs. Arakawa and Stevens vs. Melby). They did a contract signing later in the show.

Melby had only agreed to come out of retirement for a short period of time, and on the second show, Stevens beat Melby, and became entrenched as the top star in the promotion, a positioned he retained for most of the next decade.

To show how weak the NWA was at the time, Pat O'Connor, the NWA world heavyweight champion, after Shire drew such a big house in the first show, worked on Shire's second and third show in opposition to a long-time NWA promoter. O'Connor vs. Karol Krauser (Karl Gotch) was in the semifinal spot underneath Stevens vs. Ray "Thunder" Stern (another former bodybuilder named Walter Bookbinder who by this point was already a millionaire from real estate and opening the Bay Area's first co-ed health clubs, and later was recognized as one of the great success stories in both wrestling and bodybuilding circles because of the success of his airline company, Stern Air), on the third show.

However in 1962, at the peak, Shire failed to put together a Buddy Rogers vs. Stevens world title match. Shire was looking at doing at outdoor stadium shows in both San Francisco (it would have been Gomez, not Rogers in this slot) and Sacramento (where they wanted Rogers) because at the time, both cities were regularly turning fans away. Shire didn't get a date on Rogers, and plans for those major shows were dropped when the top draw, Stevens, broke his ankle in July of that year, and was out for nearly five months.

Shire's booking was patterned. Every main event, which was two out of three falls, told a match story, particularly the finish. While it would never work today, the key of the two of three fall matches were that people's finishes worked against the top guys. Submissions holds were sold as something that would break bones if kept on too long, so, like in real life, it was ridiculous for a babyface to hold on through the pain and never quit. He had a strict patterned style of working. Every match needed to incorporate three elements: Technical wrestling, high spots and what he called street fighting or brawling tactics, which would be exchanges of punches and kicks. There was a unique style, like WWE, in the sense that for the most part, when wrestlers came to California, they had to fit into the style, although they were allowed far more leeway and given more distinct personalities than WWE allows its current talent. The match story was difficult because babyfaces were strict babyfaces and heels were strict heels.

Heels never in the match story gained a fair advantage on babyfaces. For example, in an exchange of holds, even if the heel was Masa Saito, a former Olympian, against a jobber babyface, the babyface would garner the advantage. In a test of strength spot, a favorite, even if you had a physical powerhouse like a young Muraco, Billy Graham or Bruiser as a heel with the huge upper body, the 215-pound babyface would win it, and the heel would always resort to being on the losing end and kicking in the stomach or hair pulling behind the referees back. When Red Bastien late in his career came in for a run as a heel,

his famed "Flying Redhead," didn't do any of his trademark flying moves.

There was silliness behind it, because if a face turned heel, suddenly all the spots he used to win, and all the legitimate strength and flying ability he had, disappeared. Flying moves on offense were largely limited to the faces. Dropkicks were a Shire staple, and virtually every babyface, whether it was a noted flier like Bastien or Rocky Johnson, or a huge 280-pound powerhouse like Peter Maivia, if they were going to work on top, dropkicks were going to be incorporated into their comeback, particularly in receiving hot tags.

Heels could gain the advantage in tag team matches with the double-teaming behind the refs back. And the matches teased hot tags forever, constantly utilizing the spot where the heel team, better if there was a manager, would distract the ref who would miss the hot tag once or twice, leading to the face getting more of a pummeling. In a singles match, generally, the face had to make a mistake to lead to the heel transitioning to being in the advantage position, unless there was a manager involved. Everyone had not only a finishing hold, but a finishing sequence. The key to the match was the babyface making a fiery comeback. Even in matches with a jobber opponent, which at the arenas would go in excess of ten minutes and on television in excess of eight minutes, the lowest of face jobbers would have his spot where he'd pound the top heel around the ring. When Stevens was a heel, he was the master, as he'd always make the fans believe that no matter how small or how bad a won-loss record his opponent had, there would be the spot late in the match where you were certain Stevens was going to be upset.

Blood was rare. It was never used unless it was an important part of the story, such as to get over a big match as epic, because it was a death match, or a cage match to get over a no stopping for blood match or to lead to a finish. It was never done just because it was easier to get heat. When a babyface bled, almost always from being run into the ringpost, he would sell for a few minutes. There would always be the spot as the blood would run down the face of the hero, where he would sell that he had "tasted his own blood." At that point there would be a fiery comeback. Generally this would lead to a finish where the face had just done his finisher on the heel, the ref would check the cut and stop the match, ruling he was too badly cut to continue. While the fans would hate the referees, the legit credibility of the ref was always protected in the sense they always technically made the right ruling, or if they made the wrong ruling it was from either being knocked out and groggy, or distracted. There were referee bumps, but again, only on rare occasions and they always played a part in a finish that would lead to a stipulated return, such as bringing in a wrestler or boxer as special referee, or doing a rematch with two referees. Even if a referees timing was often horrible about when they waved the match off, it was also always the correct by the book call. The referees were never criticized by the announcer or even the babyface for making a bad call, even though the fans wanted to kill them, since the idea was, the referees weren't going to draw any money. Instead, it would lead to a rematch, but with no stopping on cuts or blood.

You almost always had double juice in a Texas death match, which always drew at least 10,000 fans to the Cow Palace until the bitter end. Because falls didn't count, those matches usually went 30 to 40 minutes and were, with the exception of the Battle Royal, usually the biggest match during a given year. But it wasn't milked, usually once in a city every 18 months or so. The Cow Palace was always the centerpiece of the promotion as it was the only large arena in Northern California during the early part of the era. Eventually, the Oakland Coliseum Arena opened up but Shire never ran a show in the more modern and nicer facility. While the territory was usually Fresno north (Bakersfield was run by the Southern California office), Shire's territory had times when it ran in places like Honolulu working with promoters

Ed Francis and Lord James Blears, Phoenix, Salt Lake City, Las Vegas, Anchorage and in the early 70s, was so popular on television in American Samoa and in Fiji that during the wrestling hour, it was as if the entire island shut down like there was a weekly Super Bowl type of event. But outside of Northern California, success in the other regions was short-lived.

Shire was a man of only a few major angles, but because of that, almost every big angle led to huge increases at the box office. Without question, the two most famous moments were both in the early 60s. When I would do area talk shows into the early 90s, you could almost always count on one, or both angles being brought up by a caller. The most famous was in May 1962, when Gomez, a bodybuilder/competition Olympic weightlifter who was part of a clique at Muscle Beach in Southern California with future movie stars Steve Reeves and Sean Connery, finished fourth in the 1951 Mr. America contest, was doing the "cast iron stomach" gimmick. Gomez was also known for his abs in his bodybuilding days. He would stand there with his hands behind his back and allow the wrestlers to swing away at his stomach. He'd no sell, and they'd sell like they hurt their hand. He had a car driven over his stomach, and finally he allowed wrestlers jump off a ladder onto it. Stevens made fun of the wrestlers for not having the guts to jump high enough off the ladder. So he jumped onto the stomach from nearly halfway up the ladder, higher than anyone else would go, with a kneedrop and Gomez no sold it. He did it a second time with the same result. He then climbed to the top of the ladder (at the time it was said the ladder was 12-feet high, most likely it was really eight feet, although by the 80s it was 20 feet and these days it's an even more ridiculous 24 feet), but instead of jumping on his stomach, did his Bombs Away kneedrop to Gomez's throat. Gomez was coughing up blood and it was sold that Gomez's vocal chords were ruptured and he would never be able to talk again, let alone wrestle. He actually went to Texas for several months.

It would be irony that the man who was best known for coming up with great angles had nothing to do with his biggest angle. The kneedrop to the throat off a ladder angle was one that Gomez used in every territory he worked, including with Killer Kowalski in both Boston and Chicago, Buddy Austin in Los Angeles and Duke Keomuka in Texas. It always worked, although perhaps due to the popularity of the television show and territory at the time, or because his adversary was Stevens, it clicked bigger than anywhere else and remained the most defining moment of a wrestling era in Northern California long after the same angle was long forgotten everywhere else. In fact, the Melby/Arikawa stomach claw angle that Shire takes credit for as his best angle, was actually a reprise of an angle Gomez and Keomuka did in Texas.

The other came when The Sheik, during the television commercials sponsor Jim Wesson would do with a car in the studio, came out with a sledge hammer and broke all the windows and bashed in the car. While that was common fare in the high budget Monday Night Wars, even though Sheik only appeared maybe once after the early 60s for Shire, he was one of the most talked about characters in the history of the promotion.

Stevens vs. Gomez ended up as the hottest feud in Northern California history, turning more people away at the Cow Palace than any other.

When Gomez returned, with the idea of the Candlestick Park match in July or August, Stevens had broken his ankle go-kart racing. Gomez, who was only 5-foot-6, was given the U.S. title and the top spot in the territory until Stevens' return, headlining by beating Manoukian, The Sheik, Waldo Von Erich and Kinji Shibuya to keep the title.

Gomez never forgave him. Even after Stevens' death, he noted that he felt cheated by Stevens being reckless away from the business when they both had their career feud going. He felt that they would have broken the O'Connor vs. Rogers all-time attendance and gate record

by drawing 50,000 fans to Candlestick Park, and that the two would have gone down in the history books and the legend would have carried his career to a greater level of worldwide stardom. Whether that kind of figure was feasible is a question, but had the feud's blow-off peaked in the summer when the angle was fresh in an outdoor stadium, it would have almost surely topped 30,000 fans and been remembered as the area's all-time epic event.

When Stevens came back from the injury, the feud was hot, but a piece of the emotional puzzle was taken away. Gomez looking for revenge to injure Stevens could hardly be as strong given that everyone knew Stevens was coming back from a serious injury. Plus, it was the winter and Shire wasn't looking at booking an outdoor show even though Gomez pressed him to do so. Gomez vs. Stevens drew overflow crowds of 15,450 on November 10, 1962, with Gomez retaining the title going to a draw. They came back with 16,473 on January 26, 1963, where Stevens regained the title. The final meeting, with Stevens retaining the title, drew 17,130 with 8,000 turned away, the largest wrestling crowd ever in San Francisco on February 23, 1963. It was also the largest paid attendance for any event ever held in the arena.

"The fire department got really mad at us," recalled Gomez about what was without a doubt the most famous match in the history of the promotion.

"I teamed with Wilbur Snyder, we were tag team champions wrestling underneath Gomez and Stevens during the big run," remembered Nick Bockwinkel. "It was a wonderful time to be in the territory. Shire had the personality of an old crocodile but he was one of the great strategists, bookers and ring generals there was. Wherever I would go, I would tell people, if you want to learn how to work, go to San Francisco."

It was the biggest crowd for a pro wrestling event in Northern California until the 1998 Royal Rumble at the HP Pavilion in San Jose drew 18,542. Shire produced some great programs over the next two decades, but nothing ever clicked like Stevens vs. Gomez. Interestingly, even though Stevens remained a regular for eight more years, and Gomez came in and out, and was living in the area and still wrestling when Shire closed up, he would have Gomez feud on top with Stevens and Patterson, but almost always in tag team situations with a variety of partners. While they worked often on spot shows in singles matches, there was never another Stevens vs. Gomez singles match at the Cow Palace.

Jon Miller, the current announcer for the San Francisco Giants, a fixture on ESPN baseball broadcasts for the last 19 years and a member of the Sportcasters and Sportswriters Hall of Fame, grew up during this period in Hayward, CA, not far from where Stevens lived at the time. He remembered as a 12 year old going trick-or-treating and knocking on a door, which as it turned out, was Stevens' house. Stevens was one of the area's biggest television stars and Miller was already a sports junkie, and was in awe of meeting him. Even though a heel, Stevens came off like the nicest guy, and, I guess not knowing any better, invited Miller in for some beers.

Business remained strong for 15 years, during the 70s usually ranging from 5,500 to 9,000 for regular shows, with sellouts for the Battle Royal and 10,000 or more for Texas death matches or blow-offs of hot feuds.

Shire put together the team generally considered the best tag team of the 60s, Stevens & Patterson. Patterson was the closest thing to a copy of Stevens, with the same bleached blond hair, hence their name "The Blond Bombers," and the same high flying ring style. Both men used the Bombs Away, a kneedrop off the top rope, as their finisher. They also socialized away from wrestling. Stevens & Manoukian were American Wrestling Alliance world tag team champions, and lost to

The Destroyer & brother-in-law Billy "Red" Lyons, as transitional champs, to go to Patterson & Stevens on April 17, 1965 at the Cow Palace. They remained the dominant tag team champions for most of the next two years, through April 8, 1967, when they lost to Gomez & Pedro Morales.

Shows regularly topped 10,000 during that era. Shibuya as a heel U.S. champion, drew big numbers 1964-66 against Stevens and Cowboy Bill Watts, and even bigger with Bobo Brazil and Bearcat Wright. Patterson & Stevens headlined as well.

One of the biggest singles feuds in 1967 was Stevens, as U.S. champion, against Bruno Sammartino, as WWWF champion. On July 15, 1967, at the Cow Palace, before 11,539 fans, in a match with both the U.S. and WWWF titles at stake, Stevens beat Sammartino via count out and was announced as the new WWWF champion. On the West Coast, titles changed hands on anything but a disqualification, where on the East Coast it was pinfall or submission only. A rematch on August 12, 1967, drew 11,723, also ending with a disputed finish with neither title changing hands.

1969 was a big year, because Stevens finally turned babyface for good. In many ways, such as being the most popular and most hated wrestler at the same time, Stevens was in many ways the prototype for the big talking hard brawling and drinking badass character Steve Austin played when he hit it big in 1997. Stevens was cheered and drew well in the more popular face role against heels The Sheik, Shibuya and Arakawa. But it was the program against Bill Miller, a five-main event series, all doing about 10,000 fans, in 1968 and 1969, which made the turn. Patterson returned to the territory to reform their team, only to find Stevens on the other side of the fence. Stevens vs. Patterson ended up being the hottest singles program since the early 60s, always topping 11,000 fans for eight different singles matches in 1969-70 with escalating stipulations. The program peaked with a Texas death match that sold out and reportedly turned 4,000 away, with Haystacks Calhoun as referee giving Patterson a splash and he couldn't continue.

It was 1969 where Patterson established himself as a singles draw, first working with Stevens. Like with Gomez, people noted that right at the peak of the feud, Stevens was injured outside the ring. It was pushed at the time that he broke his leg auto racing, although the real injury was a broken cheekbone that kept him out for several months. Unlike with Gomez, it was a blessing in disguise. It forced Shire to build around Patterson, who beat Morales to win the title Stevens vacated. It was a major dynamic to the success of the program when Stevens returned. Patterson was claiming to have been the real star of the team, and was the champion, but Patterson had never beaten Stevens, so the heat was that Patterson was the pretender as champion and people always considered Stevens the bigger star of the team. It became even more heated when Stevens and Gomez finally put their past behind them, and formed a tag team, beating Shibuya & Saito to win the world tag team titles in October. The next month, in the Battle Royal, Patterson did a Bombs Away onto the floor on Gomez's knee, supposedly breaking Gomez's leg. Shire created a storyline where Patterson vowed to hurt Stevens the worst way possible, by injuring all of his partners. Gomez worked the AWA and Texas, and didn't return for two years. The injury also paid dividends for years, as Gomez's broken leg was also talked about in the hype for future Battle Royals.

Finally, when the singles feud ended with Stevens winning the championship in the Texas death match, Patterson had the out that it was really Calhoun, and not Stevens, who beat him.

They transitioned into a tag team feud in 1970 with Patterson with various partners like Pampero Firpo and Cyclone Negro, losing to Stevens & Maivia. Eventually Patterson found a regular tag team

partner in a largely unknown green muscleman who Shire was trying to teach the business to. The guy was just a beginner in the ring, very limited, but he was already dynamic on interviews, and billed himself as "The True Spirit of America, Billy Graham." They held the titles most of 1971.

The Cow Palace was always a rough arena, both in and out of the ring. There was a long walk from the ring to the dressing room and security wore riot gear and regularly were swinging their billy clubs to take the heels to the back after a match. But it was the emergence of Maivia as a top drawing babyface that made it worse. Maivia became a hero to the Samoan community in the city and they would support him en masse. The problem was, his fans were huge people, bigger than most of the wrestlers. Shire had to adopt certain rules, and one of them was that Maivia would rarely lose.

But there were times he had to, usually as being a guy to get a new heel contender over for the championship. On those shows, his match, and not the title match would go on last because Shire was afraid of continuing shows after he lost.

Shire probably guessed right. In the two situations most remembered, where Maivia's role was to put over Ernie Ladd and Dutch Savage, to get both ready for Patterson when he was babyface champion, there were riots at the end of the show each night. Knife fights in the parking lot after events were not unusual. Fights in the arena were frequent. Heels in the area who smile and reminisce about how much heat they got talk very differently about the Cow Palace, talking about having to leave the arena after getting heat on Maivia, and getting back to the dressing room with Afa & Sika, and many others just as large, as fans fighting through security, being ready and able to take their heads off. Afa & Sika ended up as the ring leaders and Shire figured for the safety of his heels, he needed to get them into the business, so he had them trained, and immediately shipped them to Vancouver to learn on the road. It removed the toughest and scariest two fans, but it really didn't make things all that much safer for the heels.

The Stevens era as a full-timer came to a close without anyone knowing it on July 10, 1971. Five weeks earlier, Paul DeMarco, a solid worker who was brought in billed as "The Most Conceited Man in Wrestling," surprised fans knocking Stevens off as champion due to outside help from manager Dr. Ken Ramey, an underrated heat-getting manager who was on par with Gary Hart as one of the all-time greats, far better at getting heat at ringside than Hart, although he was not Hart's equal as a promo guy. It built to a Texas death match, which drew 12,000 fans. The bloodbath ended with Stevens missing a Bombs Away onto the floor, injuring his knee, being unable to answer the bell, and going out on a stretcher. The Texas death match, the ultimate finisher, was billed as the Stevens specialty, and it was pushed, like an Undertaker winning streak, as a match Stevens had never lost. Fans figured this result was a lock, not knowing that Stevens, who had constant trouble with the IRS, had accepted an offer to work for Verne Gagne and leave after a ten-year run, in which he and San Francisco had become synonymous in wrestling circles.

"He never paid taxes for years," remembered Harris. "For years Verne Gagne had wanted him but he didn't want to go. Gagne offered him a big amount of money if he'd come work there and he'd take care of all his income tax problems and the offer was too good to turn down."

Crowds were big the rest of the year because DeMarco had so much heat, and also because it allowed Maivia and Johnson take center stage as main event singles wrestlers. Maivia going for revenge for the injuries to his long-time partner was strong.

The Patterson babyface turn was in 1972, patterned after the Stevens turn, with Lars Anderson (Larry Heineimi) playing the Bill Miller role as the heel who turned Patterson. What was notable about that turn is it

started with Patterson as champion, having beaten Johnson, defending against another heel in Anderson. There was an angle done where Anderson beat Patterson down and bloodied him up. Still, there was no indication that this wasn't a rare battle of heels. The die wasn't cast until the final interview of the television show that aired just hours before the match. Patterson had terrorized announcer Hank Renner for years, nicknaming him "Liverlips," and shouting him down for years. Renner looked at Patterson when his interview was over, and said, "I can't believe it's come down to this, but good luck tonight."

Patterson went babyface in San Francisco a few months before Sacramento, where TV was taped. They had done the angle, but didn't follow up in Sacramento, and kept Patterson from wrestling on live television for a few months except for one match. He would do his interviews for each market. Ramey returned as Patterson's manager, as a face manager in San Francisco and in his heel role in Sacramento. In Patterson's lone television match during the transition period, he worked against a heel jobber, Kubla Khan, but Patterson worked like the heel, losing all the fair spots. The fans booed him since it was taped in Sacramento, and Renner's call of the match was ambiguous, not doing his usual heel emphasis, leaning toward him being the face (since San Francisco was the money city), making it one of the stranger television matches of the era. The turn in the rest of the circuit came in probably the best television match of that era, where Johnson brought in Patterson as his surprise partner in a tag title match against world tag champs Anderson & DeMarco, with Anderson stomping the referee's head for a DQ as DeMarco was about to be pinned in the deciding fall by Patterson.

After Stevens left the territory for the AWA, and Patterson became the top star, they did a babyface vs. babyface program billed as "The Match of the Century" a couple of times in 1973. The highlights were two one-hour matches. The first saw Stevens win the only fall, but it was ruled you had to win two falls to take the title. The second was the prototype for the modern Iron Man match, a bout where the match would go one hour, and whoever scored the most falls in the hour would be the champion. But even though three match program is well remembered since it was the last three singles matches the two had, the face vs. face dynamic didn't sell. The shows, expected to sell out at first, and promoted at a level above the other singles matches of the era, with stories about how all the promoters around the country were gambling on the outcome, pushed as the biggest match in history, only drew what were at the time, average crowds of 8,000 to 9,000. Stevens also would come back and at times, as babyfaces, reform his team with Patterson, to challenge whomever were the heel tag team champions. But since Stevens was only flying in for a show, or a week at a time, they could never win the titles again.

A perennial top headliner from 1973-1978 was Lonnie "Moondog" Mayne. Mayne had been a star from almost the start of his career in every territory he had appeared. He is generally considered the all-time top star in the history of the Portland territory. He had just come off a run in the WWWF where he headlined all the major arenas against champion Pedro Morales. He grew up in Salt Lake City, the son of Kenny Mayne, the boxing and wrestling promoter in the city, and was a good college football player. People who played the psycho character in wrestling at that time were a dime-a-dozen, but Mayne may have been the best and was probably the most convincing of all of them. He made an impression almost immediately on television when he did the thing he did to get over in every new territory a being crazy. He came out with a goldfish bowl, pulled out a live goldfish, and ate it. He then smashed the bowl, picking up the glass, scraped the glass across his chest, opening up deep cuts that left marks for life on his chest, to show the glass was real. Then he ate the glass, with blood pouring out of his mouth. Stories of him being gross on the road like sticking his bare ass and spreading it at the window of the car, or having a woman in bed, spitting straight up in the air, making her put the blanket over her head, and then farting loudly in her face, was legendary. Once, on

Thanksgiving, Mayne and The Brute (Mike Davis, best known today as Bugsy McGraw) brought out a raw turkey and started eating it, with the blood flowing everywhere. Mayne started out as the top heel, later formed a tag team with Angelo Mosca called "The M Squad," and became a babyface when Mosca turned on him. Whether he won or lost, as a face or a heel, he was never portrayed as "out of the fight" or "helpless," which is why when Muraco destroyed him in the 1978 Battle Royal it was so memorable.

Shire always booked the territory through 1977. After 16-years straight, he had burned out. "I just ran out (of ideas)," he said in an interview years later about hiring a wrestler as booker for the first time.

In wrestling, the word was that he simply had repeated the same finishes so many times that people weren't buying. But a lot of it was also that Shire's demeanor had run off his top stars. San Francisco fans were spoiled by a territory based around Stevens, and later Patterson, neither of whom were physically impressive by modern standards, but who were two of the best workers in the business. Fans had seen both for so long that they believed nobody was better. At about that time, Patterson felt that Shire was repeating his finishes and his booking pattern was getting too predictable. Patterson's life partner, Louie Dondero, with his connections, raised \$1 million in cash to try and buy into the promotion, but Shire turned him down. When Patterson and Shire had their blow-up, he left for good, only appearing again on Shire's last show four years later. While the Cow Palace shows continued to do well, there was never another babyface who could carry the territory at that level.

In 1977, Shire brought in Bob Roop from Florida, who built the territory around a feud with himself against Kevin Sullivan. Roop deviated from the Shire formula, and even though few people remember this period as well as many periods that weren't as successful, Roop vs. Sullivan was easily the most heated and best drawing feud of the 70s. The storyline was that Roop, Sullivan, Sullivan's dad and Sullivan's brother were at one point like family. Roop came in to San Francisco first, as a heel who acted like a babyface on his interviews, a role completely different than had ever been done. He played like he was a face, worked like he was a face, was billed as a former Olympian and wore the stars and stripes. But he wrestled the faces and did subtle things to make fans not trust him.

Sullivan sent in promos about coming in, claiming Roop was not what he was portraying himself as, and was two-faced. Sullivan said Roop was once his best friend, but then ended the career of his younger brother. Roop, who by that time made himself U.S. champion, claimed it was a misunderstanding and an accident and Kevin, who had a hot temper, was overreacting, claiming due to considering close to the family, and out of loyalty to Kevin's father, he would never wrestle Kevin. Roop claimed Kevin's father would explain to Kevin what happened with Kevin's alleged brother was an accident. Kevin sent in training films in the gym to the music from "Rocky," wearing a "Get Roop" T-shirt. Roop would go on television talking about how beautiful the footage was, but still playing babyface, acted like everything was a misunderstanding.

Eventually, they brought in an older man as Sullivan's father. When he showed up, he sided with Kevin, and said Roop was a monster. Roop still refused the match. Roop then started appearing under a mask as The Star Warrior, and would attack Sullivan, and everyone knew it was him, but he'd still act as though he'd never wrestle Sullivan. Finally, Sullivan unmasked the Star Warrior, and Shire ordered the match. The first bout was a non-title match at the Cow Palace, because the grudge was said to be more important than the title. Sullivan won. After the match was over, with Kevin and his father celebrating, Roop gave Kevin's father a shoulderbreaker. It was something the likes of which the people had never seen, and in a territory that was long past its peak, a series of rematches nearly sold out the Cow Palace.

"We put a cast on the old guy's shoulder the next day and got some pictures taken," said Shire. "Billed the rematch for a month, packed the Cow Palace to the gills. We brought it back five times."

Roop had brought in much of the headline crew and he and Sullivan were planning to steal the territory from Shire, but Karl Von Steiger told Shire, and he fired both Roop and Sullivan just before his biggest show of the year, the 1978 Battle Royal, which ended up being his most memorable Battle Royal of all.

After Muraco, who Shire built the territory around, walked out a few months later in the middle of a main event program with Mayne, the territory was down again. The Cow Palace main events were often taken from bringing up guys like Mayne and Roddy Piper, who were based in Southern California. It was a mess, because the television from the Olympic Auditorium in Los Angeles aired live every Wednesday night, and Mayne & Piper were a heel tag team on Wednesday, while on Saturday's television, Mayne was a babyface and they were feuding. But they were still drawing just as well as they had been doing for years. Then Mayne passed away at the age of 34 in a car accident on August 13, 1978, just a week after he told his parents he was planning on retiring around Christmas time (keep in mind that main event pro wrestlers in that era didn't retire at 35, even though they often said they were going to). By this point, the Sacramento tapings had been moved from Thursdays to Mondays. Mayne held both the Americas' title for LeBelle as his top heel and the U.S. title for Shire as his top face, and both televisions aired in San Francisco. The same Shire who fined Stevens and Watts, because he found out they were socializing together in a bar in Los Angeles, nearly 400 miles away, that the odds of any fan in the territory seeing was minuscule, was having his top babyface and top heel as best friends and tag team partners on television in prime time on Wednesday night beamed into his market.

Mayne was leaving San Bernardino at just before midnight to make the 440-mile one-way drive to Sacramento, and got in a fatal crash en route. However, the news didn't break until late in the week that the Ronald Mayne found dead in the accident was the pro wrestler Lonnie "Moondog" Mayne. Mayne naturally wasn't at the taping and nobody knew why. So Shire created an angle that Mayne was so furious at Buddy Rose (who had laid him out the week before) that he was backstage and going so crazy they weren't going to let him out of his dressing room. The problem is, this aired on Saturday, and by Thursday, all the newspapers in the area had written stories about Mayne dying in an auto accident. Shire didn't change the show itself, only having someone at Ch. 44 in San Francisco do a promo in the last segment of the day, acknowledging that Mayne had died in an auto accident earlier in the week, and because of that, there was a new main event that night at the Cow Palace with Rose vs. Dean Ho.

By this point, the top heel crew, Rose, Ed Wiskoski and Piper, were all based in Oregon. and most of the spot shows were being headlined by lesser pushed guys.

In early 1979, Shire made the decision to shut down the territory because the spot shows, without the television headliners, were no longer profitable. He said the same gates that in the past would give him \$700 in profit per night in small towns, were losing \$100 per night, and while he could certainly afford that, and was still making money in San Francisco, he was having problems with KTXL-TV in Sacramento, where the shows were taped. The final edition of Roy Shire's Big-Time Wrestling was taped on March 19, 1979, in Sacramento. At no point during the show was anything hinted that this was different from any other show, until the very end. Renner always closed the show saying, "Don't forget to tune in next week, and we'll see you there." Instead, he closed the show saying, "We'll see you somewhere down the line."

Shire decided it would make more sense because he couldn't find a new station to tape his own shows, to instead use tapes of the one-hour Big-Time Wrestling show taped on Saturday nights in Portland. This was not the 90 minute Portland Wrestling show, but the rest of the card that didn't air in Portland, that was taped largely for the Seattle/Tacoma market. He wouldn't have to pay any production costs except for the tape of his localized interviews, since KPTV-TV in Portland produced the Portland show. He ran the Cow Palace off that tape. But between the move of the Cow Palace from Saturday to Friday (since Portland ran every Saturday night), attendance dropped, and never recovered. Shire and Rose had problems, leading to June 8, 1979, when Rose was scheduled to drop the U.S. title to Ron Starr.

On the localized interview that was taped on June 2 in Portland, and was going to air on the June 9 television show, Rose teased problems. As they were promoting the next show (taped before this one) and announcer Frank Bonema talked about Starr defending against Piper and Rose facing George Welles, Rose talked about if the guy doesn't get beat for the title, how is he the former champion? Shire and Rose had an argument at the show which led to Shire pulling Rose from the card. Instead, it was announced that Rose had been stripped of the title and Starr and Johnny Mantell went into the ring. After the first fall, Rose left the dressing room and went to the ring, to show the people that he was there. Shire was chasing after him. Shire yelled at his police officers to arrest Rose and take him from the ring. But the officers thought this was an angle and didn't want to be part of the show. Shire got so mad when the officers wouldn't heed his commands, that he took a swing at an officer, and all the police grabbed Shire and took him to the back.

Rose then got on the p.a. and talked about Shire being a liar, bringing up names like Muraco, Mr. Fuji and Toru Tanaka, who had left the area due to problems with Shire. Rose may or may not have said wrestling was fake, as the few people who were around who remember that shocking moment, all have different stories. But with the exception of the annual Battle Royals, Shire never drew another big house. Shire tried to get Rose blacklisted by the NWA, but Rose had already told Don Owen in Portland about the problems and Owen told him to do whatever he needed to do. Shire did one more show working with the Portland office.

Shire replaced the Portland tapes with the All-Star Wrestling tapes from Kansas City, and had Starr, who was his top babyface, move to the Kansas City territory. This was a disaster. Portland Wrestling didn't draw well because people were used to "their" television show. But Portland was at the time a hot territory loaded with talent. Central States Wrestling was known in the industry as "the armpit of the business." In comparison, the talent was awful. Plus, the cost to bring in talent from Kansas City was far more than Portland. Crowds dwindled to around 500 fans, with Starr usually headlining against the Central States top heel at the time, "Bruiser" Bob Sweetan. Shire dropped Kansas City and made a deal with Eddie Graham for the Florida tapes to be shown. By this point, in late 1980, in the cities that had cable, the main wrestling show was Georgia Championship Wrestling on Ch. 17 out of Atlanta, and the top feud was Dusty Rhodes vs. Ole Anderson, one of the best feuds of that or any other era. Rhodes was the top draw in both Florida and Georgia at the time.

Rhodes was brought in as the new top babyface. Crowds were up a little, but still very disappointing and with the cost of flying all the talent in from Florida, it wasn't profitable. Even when Ole Anderson was brought in as Rhodes' opponent, it only drew 3,700 fans. By that point, the story of "Promoter Roy Shire" (for two decades on television, Shire's name was never spoken on television without the word Promoter affixed before it) took on major irony.

Shire used television on KTVU-TV to put down the NWA promotion run by Malciewicz in 1961, who had run the territory for the prior 30 years.

But without television, they simply couldn't compete. Malciewicz complained to the NWA about the infringement on his territory, but the NWA was weakened at that point. Most of the early Shire talent came from the Indianapolis office of Barnett, and Barnett at that point, even though he had the biggest territory in the U.S. at the time, was not allowed into the NWA because he was gay. During most of the 50s it was never an issue because Barnett and Kohler were partners and Kohler was a member. But when Barnett went on his own, even though Sam Muchnick pushed for him to be accepted, the old boys club didn't want someone of that type in their group.

Shire's promotion from 1960-68 was instead a member of the American Wrestling Alliance (not to be confused with the American Wrestling Association with the same letters, which Gagne started using in 1960 when he pulled out of the NWA because they wouldn't give him a run as world champion), which was the name Barnett's promotion used.

In 1968, Shire, Mike LeBelle (Southern California) and Barnett (Australia) all joined the NWA. Muchnick was forever trying to present a unified political front for the business, and they were three of the most powerful promoters in the world at the time. At one point, Shire was even a Vice President of the NWA, and was on the championship nomination committee even though Shire rarely booked the NWA world champion. Shire's promotion was always based around the U.S. title, which he headlined nearly every big show with. The first NWA world title match after joining the alliance was on November 9, 1968, with Gene Kiniski pinning "Flying" Fred Curry. Shire used Dory Funk Jr. as world champion once in his four-year title reign, on a Battle Royal show where he beat Shibuya.

It was nearly five years between NWA world title matches at the Cow Palace, when Jack Brisco was brought in to do a program with Mayne, and in the hype, it was made clear that Mayne's U.S. title was just as valuable as Brisco's world title, and both titles were at stake in their first match. Because Muchnick was NWA president and he exercised control of booking, Brisco had to go over in the feud at the end, and Shire booked the final match as only for the world title, had Mayne, the heel, bleed heavy and look strong, but it was stopped on blood. Normally that would lead to another match, but because Shire couldn't get the finish he wanted, the program ended and Brisco never returned. Terry Funk never came as champion. By the late 70s, Harley Race appeared maybe once or twice a year and the title was put over stronger.

In late 1980, karma struck. Verne Gagne made a deal with KTVU-TV, which had dumped Shire ten years earlier. Nomellini, the area wrestling and football legend, who Shire turned into a prelim wrestler when he took over, was used as the front man. After Malciewicz closed in 1962, Shire used Nomellini very briefly as a wrestler, but would not push him as a star. While Nomellini was 38 and one could argue he was past his prime, he was still first-team All Pro in the previous 1961 season, and held the Gagne AWA world tag team titles with Snyder before leaving for 49ers camp the previous summer. So he was hardly washed up as a football player or no longer a top star in wrestling. He debuted shortly after the season ended, won a few prelim matches, and on April 7, 1962, worked second from the top, teaming with Melby (brought back a month earlier) to lose to world tag champs Shibuya & Arakawa, with Melby doing the job. On June 2, he even pinned Kiniski. A feud with Stevens, or even Manoukian (a member of the 49ers vs. a former member of the Raiders would have been an easy sell) was a natural. But something happened, as Nomellini almost never lost for Malciewicz, and he was asked to lose to Stevens in Richmond and San Jose, which made no sense because at the Cow Palace that year with business as hot as it was, it would have been a record setting program. On July 21, 1962, Nomellini wrestled his last match in San Francisco, losing to Ed Miller.

Shire was never popular with the media. During his 20 years of promoting and all the big crowds, the only coverage, besides the few paragraph previews in most of the cities and very short results pieces, were when he was in trouble. Stevens almost never had feature stories written about him, with the few stories written coming either because of being arrested for tax trouble or because there was controversy over Shire not delivering the advertised main events when Stevens would get injured doing high-speed extracurricular activities. Even when Stevens and prelim wrestler Rick Renaldo were in a store that was being robbed by two armed gunmen, and Stevens, never thinking of the consequences, attacked both men and he and Renaldo beat the hell out of them, it got minimal coverage.

Nomellini as a local sports legend got more press for promoting wrestling before he promoted his first show than Shire got in the previous decade of drawing big houses. Worse, besides Gagne's usual AWA stable, he regularly used Stevens and Patterson, who had reunited as his heel world tag team champions in 1978 and 1979. Even though Patterson by this time was a regular in WWF, and Stevens ended up there a year later, they were on good terms with Gagne and wrestled regularly on the San Francisco shows, where they were the two biggest draws until the emergence of Hulk Hogan. In 1980, when the AWA got their television, and Patterson & Stevens were regularly cutting interviews talking about coming back soon, they were still, by far, the two most popular wrestlers in Northern California. Shire would have to compete against a far stronger promoter who had the two biggest stars he had ever created. Perhaps with the pipeline to Florida and with Georgia wrestling already very popular in the parts of the Bay Area that had WTCG, Ch. 17 from Atlanta, on cable, and the charisma of Rhodes, Shire could have given a battle had he wanted to. But he was rich, his health had taken a turn for the worst, and he felt double-crossed by an industry where he thought he was protected from an invasion.

Shire was furious, and called Barnett, who by this time was considered the power behind the NWA, as the guy running the Georgia territory and booker of the world champion. He told Barnett to tell Gagne to get out of his territory. Barnett called Gagne, and well, Gagne didn't listen. The irony is amazing. Twenty years earlier, Shire was Gagne, taking advantage of a period when the NWA was weak. For years, Shire flourished when the NWA was strong, making huge money with the Oakland Coliseum Arena, at the time one of the nicest arenas in the country, sitting right there, and nobody would book it. A few years later, in an irony Gagne never truly recognized, it was Vince McMahon in the position of Gagne. Gagne, like Shire a few years earlier, complained that the rules of business were that you respect each other's territorial boundaries. Gagne never believed those rules applied to him as he expanded into Los Angeles in 1969 and failed, and did so here with a little more success. And McMahon flourished. Years later, it was McMahon who complained as loudly as anyone, when WCW signed his talent for more money, and put an opposing television show against him on Monday night, claiming unfair business practices.

Shire suffered a heart attack in 1980, which may have been a key reason for him deciding to give up rather than fight Gagne. Plus, even if he fought him, it would be with talent sent by Eddie Graham and possibly Barnett from Florida and Georgia. So the inevitability is he would lose control and power of what he had and either be axed out completely, or just kept on as a figurehead. He kept running Cow Palace shows, with Rhodes beating Dick Slater in an elimination match to determine who ended up being the final U.S. champion on November 8, 1980.

On January 24, 1981, he held his final show—a Battle Royal. It was only a week earlier when Nomellini and Gagne ran their first show, across the bay at the Oakland Coliseum Arena, and since it was no secret what worked in San Francisco, Gagne booked a Battle Royal. Even though Patterson had appeared on the Gagne show a week

earlier, he also worked for Shire for the first time in almost four years. Since there was no angle to build, Shire went out letting the fans be happy, as Patterson threw out Dick Slater to win. Even with the stronger TV, the first AWA show drew about 5,000, a little less than Shire's final show. During the final show they mentioned a February date and tickets were put on sale. But the next Saturday, the television was gone. While it was far from the automatic sellout of Battle Royals in the past, he jacked up the ticket prices to a level never seen before, and the crowd of 6,400 was more than a \$60,000 house, the same range as his Battle Royal sellouts years earlier. And thus, he was able to brag that he went out on top.

During his strongest period, in the 1960s, Shire taped two television shows. National All-Star Wrestling was the live show on Friday nights at the KTVU-TV studios, and a custom show to build the Cow Palace matches. Big-Time Wrestling was taped on Thursday nights in Sacramento at the KCRA-TV studios, which was taped in front of the people with localized interviews building the bi-weekly shows at the Sacramento Memorial Auditorium. While Shire drew his biggest crowds in San Francisco, at no point was he close to the most popular thing on the local sports scene, between football, baseball, basketball and Roller Derby. But in Sacramento, wrestling was the most popular sport in the city, and it remains one of the strongest per-capita markets for WWE today. The annual Sacramento Thanksgiving weekend Battle Royal, while scaled down from San Francisco with 14 men, and far less well-known nationally, was in some ways an even more major event as a big thing in the smaller market.

The show taped in Sacramento was the syndicated show sent to markets around Northern California, and at times, places far from Northern California, where the Sacramento live interviews would be edited out and replaced by localized market specific interviews. Shire had some unique and campy nuances, most notably a wall poster board listing the television matches of the night, with a series of stars on top. The babyfaces name would always be on the left, and the heel name on the right.

A buxom stripper type, called Miss Wrestling, or more specifically, always referred to as "The Lovely Miss Wrestling," in a bikini top or super tight top, would stand next to the board. At the end of each match, Renner or Harris would pitch, saying, "Let's go to the lovely Miss Wrestling and she'll put the star by the winner, Ray Stevens (or whomever)." Miss Wrestling was also used during the first interview segment of every show, when they would have a publicity photo book and announce the matches and stipulations for whatever the local arena was they were promoting. Miss Wrestling's cleavage would always remain in the corner of the camera and covering a corner of the publicity photos. There were only a handful of Miss Wrestling's during the two decades. Miss Wrestling, who stood there, never talked, and with the exception of possibly one or two incidents where a heel would chase her, during a 20 year run, never did anything more than stand there and put stars next to winners and hold picture books. Yet Miss Wrestling ended up as the most successful alumnus of the Roy Shire era.

Adrienne Barbeau, whose first television job was in the role in the 60s, became an accomplished actress. After leaving the wrestling gig, she went to New York and was a go-go dancer who later had starring roles on Broadway in classic musicals like "Fiddler on the Roof," (playing one of the daughters) and "Grease" (playing Rizzo). She was best known as the third lead on the highly-rated and groundbreaking television show, "Maude," (1972-78; in both the 1972-73 and 75-76 seasons it was the fourth highest rated TV show in the country), playing the pretty daughter of Bea Arthur. She was the subject of numerous punch lines at the time because it was joked nobody noticed at the time if she could act (she was actually quite accomplished) because they always shot her walking down the stairs where her breasts bouncing would be the first thing coming into the shots. Her

wall poster was one of the 20 best selling posters of the 1970s. She appeared in several horror and science fiction movies in the 80s that were considered cult classics. She more recently starred on the HBO series "Carnivale" (2003-05) and wrote a best selling autobiography in 2006. Now, at 64, she is still acting, having done two movies and had guest shots on both "Dexter" on Showtime and Grey's Anatomy this year. She was married to John Carpenter, and is believed to have been instrumental in Carpenter showing interest in making Roddy Piper a movie star.

A later Miss Wrestling was Miki Garcia, who would be the answer to the trivia question of the first pro wrestling diva to pose in Playboy (Barbeau turned down lucrative offers to pose in the magazine), on the cover of the January 1973 issue. Billed as having 38-22-36 measurements, Garcia was Miss Sacramento in the Miss California beauty pageant when Shire hired her to be Miss Wrestling in 1970. She was apparently the second woman in the history of the magazine to pose fully nude. It paid off, as she left wrestling behind and became Vice President of Playboy for ten years. In 1985, she testified before the U.S. Attorney General's Office on the plight of former Playmates, between the drug usage to get the bodies, the venereal diseases that infected so many of them, and the high rate of attempted suicides, as well as the orgies they performed in to please Hugh Hefner, causing a massive rift between the two. Now 62, she lives in Folsom, CA, after spending years working in real estate and writing for local newspapers, she does an "Ask Miki" advice column for two local newspapers and an area magazine.

The first interview segment on the show following a major show was the most important. Unlike most promotions, which would hype a card to death, and then when it was over, forget it ever existed and hype the next show, Shire felt differently. He both felt that if you promote something as a must-see event on your television show, and then don't go into detail on television about what happened, then how important could the event have been? There was a secondary purpose. While most promoters didn't do that because their idea was to make you want to see the next show, and the previous show was no longer a concern, Shire's mentality was that he wanted to get you to buy tickets to the next show, but his belief is if he made you feel that you blew it by missing the previous show, you'd be more likely to attend the next one.

Renner, or Harris before him, would, during the first interview segment of the first show after a live event, run down what happened "last Saturday night at the Cow Palace." He'd run through the prelims, just giving the result, and get more descriptive as they got to the important matches, peaking for the main event, always describing it as if it was an epic battle.

"Pat Patterson won the first fall with the figure four leglock. Ray Stevens came back to win the second fall with the atomic drop. In the third fall, Patterson got the upper hand and rammed Stevens head into the post. Stevens' head was split wide open and the blood was gushing. Patterson continued his onslaught until Stevens tasted his own blood. You know what happens when Ray Stevens tastes his own blood. He tore into Patterson, slammed his head into the ringpost. Now Patterson's head was split wide open. Both men were throwing punches at each other as referee Frank Nocety was trying to inspect the damage. Stevens was getting the upper hand and may have had the championship in his grasp, but Nocety checked both men's cuts, ruled that they were too deep and stopped the match ruling both men unable to continue and the match didn't have a winner. Man, you should have been there. But, two weeks from tonight, at the Cow Palace, let's go to the Lovely Miss Wrestling, and Roy Shire has outbid every promoter in the country for the rematch everyone is talking about, in the main event, it's Pat Patterson defending the U.S. title, and his opponent will be (pause for effect Howard Finkel style), Ray Stevens in a rematch, but this time the National Wrestling Alliance has ruled that there will be no stopping for cuts or blood. The men can

bleed to death and the referee and the doctor do not have the power to stop the match."

While it's little known and almost never talked about, what would have been Shire's biggest coup ever was the one he didn't pull off. He was in serious negotiations to do an even bigger Nomellini, in getting a sports superstar who played on a local team, to do pro wrestling in the off-season--Wilt Chamberlain. Chamberlain played for the San Francisco Warriors, based out of the Cow Palace, in 1963, and was the biggest name and drawing card in his sport. At a legitimate 7-1 and 275 pounds, and being so much taller and a far better athlete than Ernie Ladd, who was just starting his career at the time, Chamberlain could have very easily been the highest paid attraction in wrestling of the time had he chosen to go in that direction.

Shire himself had done angles with the universally recognized world light heavyweight boxing champion, Hall of Famer Archie Moore, who held the title from 1952 to 1961. In September 8, 1956 in Ogden, UT, they did an angle at a wrestling show where Moore refereed a Shire match, leading to a boxing match. The match with Professor Roy Shire is one of three matches with pro wrestlers that Moore has on his official record, the other two being with Sterling Davis and Mike DiBiase, all set up similarly off his refereeing matches with those heels and getting into it with them after the match. Interestingly, all three matches ended with the wrestler bleeding and it stopped on blood in the third round. The win over Shire, a non-title match since the light heavyweight limit was 175 pounds in those days, was Moore's last match before facing Floyd Patterson for the world heavyweight title. There's nobody around who can vouch for the legitimacy, or not, of the Shire match. The three matches with wrestlers starting the same, with an angle when Moore refereed, and ending identically, would certainly seem to answer to that question. However, the DiBiase fight is believed to have been legit by both boxing people and wrestling people, all of whom figured it going in to be a work. It's notable that an all-time great boxer and current world champion would be licensed to fight men who had never even had an amateur, let alone a professional match. An even more well remembered feud was when Moore got into it with both Shire Brothers. The angle started with Moore as the special referee for a tag team title match, leading to a handicap boxing match, where Moore "knocked out" both Roy and Ray in succession, before a near sellout 12,000 fans on October 1, 1960, in Indianapolis. Those matches, which clearly were works, are not listed in Moore's boxing record. Moore was brought in a few times by Shire during his run to be a special referee.

But there seemed to be an inverse effect between the success of Shire and his inability to get along with anyone. Shire in that sense was the 180 degree opposite of Paul Boesch, who was approachable and friendly, to a fault, because he cared so deeply with how he was viewed in the community. Shire seemed to not get along with anyone, whether they be fans, employees, wrestlers or people he did business with, seemed to have disdain for almost everyone, and was unconcerned about how public reputation and that he never got media recognition for his talents as a promoter. While promoters like Muchnick and Boesch hated the term "marks," Boesch would always say the word was "customers," and would never publicly insult his audience, Shire would act like a con man, talking out of the side of his mouth, and blowing off fans if they approached him.

"I don't subscribe to the theory that a sucker is born every minute," he said. "There's one born every second."

He yelled, screamed at and swore at everyone he had to deal with for business reasons, while spitting his tobacco juice on the floor in the middle of conversations. He was the king of his little world, and felt he didn't have to be nice to anyone. People who did business with him, when they needed to talk with him, when calling his ranch, would secretly beg for wife Dorothy to answer the phone, since she was always pleasant.

Shire used the money he earned in wrestling to build the Toe Hold Ranch near Sebastopol, CA, in Sonoma County on 1,100 acres, where he raised cattle, and owned real estate property around the Sacramento area.

Shire's success seemed to breed arrogance that led to so many of his top stars walking out on him. When the territory was hot, it was one of the best places to work. His prelim wrestlers made \$20,000 to \$30,000 per year, which in the 60s was more than headliners in many circuits, and his prelim wrestlers were better workers than headliners in other circuits. That was during a period when the average major league baseball player earned about \$20,000 per year. Stevens would have legitimately earned \$85,000 to \$100,000 in the early 60s. When he had an IRS problem in 1962, he had earned \$60,000 that year in California even though he had missed almost five months of that year due to a broken ankle, and that figure was just within the state. He worked many events out of the state as one of the biggest stars in the world at the time. That was comparable to a touring world champion in that era and the same as the highest paid major league baseball player and probably every NFL player with the possible exception of Johnny Unitas. Chamberlain, the highest paid NBA player, earned \$65,000. And the travel was easy and the weather was great. Most of the key cities were about two hour drives or less if you lived in a central location in the Bay Area. Some wrestlers looking back will admit Shire paid relatively well during the big years, and nobody knocked his promoting and booking ability, but most didn't have anything good to say about him personally.

He was always in the center of controversy, whether it be with his television stations, his promoting partners, his wrestlers, or the athletic commission.

In the early 60s in Sacramento, Stevens was scheduled to defend his U.S. title against Red Bastien. Bastien blew out his back that afternoon lifting weights, and could barely walk, and in no way could do a match (this was in the days before guys would load up on ridiculous quantities of pain killers, not that they didn't take some and wouldn't drink heavily). At the time the commission was strict that if the main event doesn't take place as advertised, the promoter had to refund the gate money. He got Bastien to the apron and Stevens jumped in and laid him out before the bell. The match did start and Stevens continued to beat on him, the match was stopped due to Bastien's injuries and he was stretchered out. To get over the angle, Shire had Bastien pretend to be in even more pain than he really was in, and paid for him to spend four days in the hospital in Sacramento.

Roy Tennison of the athletic commission then went on the local news and said that even though he was in the hospital for four days, Bastien was not really injured. Shire then went on his television show the next week and said that Tennison was a "damn liar." Tennison threatened to sue. This led to uneasiness with the athletic commission, but at the end of the day, Shire generated more money for the commission through taxes on his shows than any other boxing or wrestling promoter. They grudgingly left him alone most of the time. But they were sticklers with him when it came to refunding tickets when a main event didn't come through as advertised.

When Stevens was injured in 1969 before a scheduled main event with Patterson, in those days it was customary to leave your ticket stub on the arena floor rather than taking it home. Because of the commission ruling, after the show, several fans scoured the floors collecting hundreds of stubs, sent them to the commission, and Shire had to refund significant money.

At another point, there was the situation where Mr. Fuji and Shire had a blow-up just before Shire had his biggest non-Battle Royal match of 1977, a February 12, 1977, Gladiator Death match with Fuji defending the title against Patterson. Shire came up with a unique game plan. In

the late 60s, when Patterson was a heel, he went through a period where he wrestled wearing a mask. It would be clear he was Patterson. He would do his interviews without a mask. He would wrestle wearing it, claiming he wanted to protect his good looks. In reality, during the climax of matches, he would put a foreign object in his mask and head-butt opponents for the pin. In 1971, when Patterson & Billy Graham were world tag team champions, Graham also started wearing a mask to protect his looks, and also used the same gimmick. Patterson had long since turned babyface, and on occasion as a gimmick, Patterson would announce before a big singles blow-off match, that he was wearing the mask. That was a signal that he was almost surely going over, using a loaded head-butt. So Shire announced that with no rules in this Gladiator death match, Patterson was going to wear a mask. He then announced the next week that Fuji, who was no longer on television and in fact, no longer even in the state, had sent word that he was also going to wear a mask. Shire instead brought in Prof. Toru Tanaka, who at the time was working in Southern California, and he wore the mask, as did Patterson. Patterson won the title after multiple falls in a wild match before more than 12,000 fans.

It was pretty obvious it wasn't Fuji, and most ringsiders, since Los Angeles wrestling aired in the market, knew it was Tanaka under the mask. A few days later it turned into a major local news story, and there was talk that the commission would suspend Shire's promoters' license for the fraud, since this time they never announced the main eventer wasn't there, and no refunds were offered. Somehow, Shire got out of trouble when Tanaka testified that he wasn't called by Shire, and that he and Fuji conspired to defraud the consumers with Tanaka doing it because he knew there was a big main event payoff for the match. Shire went on television telling the story that he didn't know what happened, but was suspicious as the match was going on. He said that backstage after the match, he ripped the mask off of Fuji, saw a face bloodied beyond belief, and didn't recognize who it was, but said he could see it wasn't Fuji. Tanaka was fined \$1,000, a heavy amount. Fuji was suspended for years, and wasn't allowed back until the WWF came in to California in the 80s.

Shire ended up making out like a bandit, because he then explained that since Patterson didn't beat Fuji, the U.S. title was held up. With his credibility at a low point, he announced a tournament on March 12, 1977, for the vacant title, bringing back The Sheik after more than a decade, along with using Gomez, Johnson, Ivan Koloff, Roop, Al Madril, Maivia, Patterson and Alexia Smirnoff, which drew another near sellout.

Other times he wasn't as successful. Shire never got along with the management of his television stations in either San Francisco or Sacramento, where he did tapings. When taping at the NBC studios in Sacramento and the KTVU-TV studios, Shire would always be spitting tobacco juice or cigar juice on the floors. He would be told not to by people at the stations, but since his show was doing huge ratings, second highest on the station in San Francisco, and the highest on the station in Sacramento, he never listened. Finally a major executive from KTVU-TV, told him not to do it anymore at a meeting. He didn't listen, and in 1970, National All-Star Wrestling was canceled.

Shire was shocked, but times had changed. The station during the 60s went from being a new station desperate for any kind of a program that would draw an audience, to being the most successful independent station west of the Mississippi, and no longer felt they needed wrestling if it meant dealing with Shire. Shire printed flyers at the next Cow Palace show, which drew poorly without any television, telling fans to write and phone KTVU management to get wrestling back. He organized fans doing protest marches in front of the station demanding they bring back wrestling (Ata Johnson, the mother of Dwayne Johnson, along with Afa & Sika, at the time all wrestling fans, were involved in protest marches). Shire publicly talked about having to pull

out of the Cow Palace, and even talked of closing the territory, but finally made a deal with KBHK-TV, Ch. 44, for a Saturday at 5 p.m. time slot. However, they had heard the horror stories of Ch. 2 and didn't want any tapings at their studios. So from 1970 until early 1979, the Sacramento tapings, moved to KTXL-TV, Ch. 40, because the NBC affiliate was tired of Shire as well, aired in San Francisco with localized interviews.

The Sacramento tapings every Thursday night at 7 p.m. during the 70s were quite the experience. It was a tiny studio with a few rows of bleachers. During the 60s and early part of the 70s, when Shire carried a strong crew, the small crowd would make a lot of noise, not unlike in any other circuit's studio show. But during the latter part of the decade, Shire was often unhappy with the crowd noise. So he would pipe in fake noise, not unlike WCW and WWF would do in later years with "sound sweetening." Only Shire did it on a cut-rate budget leading to some ridiculously bad tapes. He played a soundtrack of a crowd reacting to a hot match, which would include sounds of bumps that weren't taking place in the match, and crowd peaks for big spots that didn't coincide at all with what was going on in the ring.

The tapings would run live-to-tape, so they ended at 8 p.m. and the studio was cleared out. Usually a few dozen fans would hang around, both to get autographs of the wrestlers when they left hours later, and they would listen as the interviews for all the various syndicated stations would take place. The studio doors were thick enough that you couldn't hear the lineups or the cities, but when the wrestlers would peak their interviews and shout, you could hear them through the doors. The wrestlers knew fans would be sticking their ears against the walls trying to find out what they weren't supposed to about the same matches and feuds in other cities, and sometimes wrestlers would pound as hard as they could on the metal doors, making a noise that was do a number on the eardrums of the fans with their ears to the door on the other side.

Shire always insisted on closely cropped face shots of his wrestlers doing interviews. But with the long sessions, often lasting as much as three hours of guys doing similar interviews but for different cities, the practical jokers were in full effect. The biggest was Patterson, since he was a natural joker to begin with, and as the territory's biggest star, was largely untouchable. He would constantly get behind the camera, make faces, crawl on the floor where cameras didn't see him, tickle wrestlers, pull down their tights, try and pull down the pants of announcer Hank Renner and ultimately try and make the wrestlers crack up. Shire, a stickler for saving money, would be furious when any tape was wasted and hated second takes. Often interviews ran with the talent seemingly cracking up for no apparent reason (usually someone doing something to Renner) or with their eyes distracted, usually watching a prank being pulled as they were talking.

While the Big-Time Wrestling show on Ch. 44 didn't get nearly the ratings National All Star Wrestling on the stronger VHF station got, the Cow Palace attendance remained strong. A big blow to the territory came when KBHK-TV (which aired Smackdown until this last year) moved the show from Saturday afternoons to Saturday morning at 10 a.m. Shire went to the station's studios in his usual totally undiplomatic style, and demanded he be given a better time slot. The blow-up was such that the argument ended with him being kicked off the station. He got a weaker station that wasn't carried in many cities on cable. This came at about the same time Shire had a blow-up with KTXL in Sacramento and lost TV there.

At another point, when Frankie Cain became Shire's top heel as The Great Mephisto in 1972-73, using the loaded boot gimmick and doing an undefeated gimmick for about a year, in the dressing room after a bloodbath with Patterson where he finally lost the championship, Cain slapped around Shire in front of all the wrestlers, and nobody helped. Cain was fired and Shire tried to get the NWA to blackball him. But

Cain drew well on top in San Francisco, and it wasn't long before the Texas promoters brought him in to work with Jose Lothario. But Mephisto never had another run nearly as successful.

In 1973, he had a public feud with Johnny Miller, a policeman and former boxer in Modesto who promoted weekly wrestling events on Friday nights in Modesto using Shire's talent, as well as area boxing shows. Miller went to the athletic commission and claimed Shire was starving him of talent, and in particular, not booking Patterson, the biggest draw at the time, on his shows. Shire told Miller that Patterson no longer wanted to work on his shows and that he couldn't make Patterson work the shows if Patterson didn't want to. This came a week after Miller had booked wrestlers from Southern California and Mildred Burke's women when Shire wouldn't book any wrestlers for him the week before. Miller wrote to the athletic commission that he was told by Burke that Shire threatened to kill her because she had run an all-women's show in Las Vegas, which was at the time a Shire city. He told the commission Shire had threatened him, and other local promoters on several occasions with ruining their towns unless they did exactly what he told them to do. He also claimed Shire forced the matchmaker of his boxing shows to cancel boxing events in Sacramento during the week of his shows or he would ruin pro wrestling in Modesto. This got written up in all the major area newspapers.

One of Shire's biggest obstacles came in the late 70s when Edward "Bearcat" Wright Jr., Claude "Thunderbolt" Patterson and Ron "Zulu" Pope, three African-American stars, protested that Shire didn't give African-Americans fair opportunities. The truth is that Shire was like almost every promoter of the era. He always wanted an African-American babyface and a Mexican babyface on his roster, usually one each. When one left, another would be brought in. Wright and Thunderbolt Patterson had both worked for him in the 60s, and Wright drew big houses as a challenger for the U.S. title against Stevens and Shibuya and even held the title in 1968, even after the fiasco in Los Angeles when he double-crossed Fred Blassie and had refused to drop the world title. Pope, who came in during the late 70s, was a big guy, but not charismatic and one of the worst workers around. He was brought in, didn't get over, and as a prelim guy when the territory was down, he made peanuts, like as bad as \$100 some weeks. They went everywhere they could to say that Shire was racist, paid Pope poorly, wouldn't hire Wright or Patterson (both of whom were big draws at times but had horribly bad reputations in the business for turning on promoters in the case of Patterson—at the time working security at the Los Angeles Times for barely minimum wage, and going into business for himself in the case of Wright). In the end, the California State Athletic Commission ordered these words to be broadcast over the air before every one of Shire's television shows: "The following matches are exhibitions and for entertainment purposes only. The winners and losers have been decided in advance by the promoters."

After Patterson had left the territory, he came to Los Angeles on the way to a New Japan tour, and worked against Badnews Allen (who was the first person ever in a promo in California to out Patterson as being gay), billed as U.S. champion. Since the promotion of that match aired in San Francisco, Shire came on television the next week and cut a strange promo.

Shire had never acknowledged anything on the Los Angeles shows, pretending they didn't exist. Often booking on those shows contradicted his own angles, and he didn't seem to care. Sometimes he'd use top Los Angeles guys who people knew as job guys, just to prove he could, or not push them like he had done earlier with Nomellini. John Tolos was the prime example of a superstar in Los Angeles, due to his promo work, who Shire rarely gave interview time with, and Tolos struggled, usually in the undercard for shire. Most often, the top guys from Los Angeles would be used underneath by Shire, always trying to make his product seem superior. And Shire

himself rarely did anything but occasional promos to get over a major match.

But he was furious about this, starting calmly, saying how there have been times where he's gone on vacation and things have happened and he missed a title change. But, as he grew madder, he said it had been years since Patterson had been the U.S. champion and was not even a top contender for the title. But as to how Patterson was billed as champion on the show, he said, it's possible Mike LeBelle (whose name was never used before on his TV) wasn't aware of who the champion was and it's possible Patterson told him he was the champion, but he still should have checked. He said there was no excuse he could come up with for Patterson. He concluded, "Mike LeBelle is a damn dummy and Pat Patterson is a damn liar!"

This happened once before, when Andre the Giant pulled out of a Battle Royal. Shire cut a promo, claiming he had heard about a new star in Texas named T-John Thibodeaux (a wrestler in the late 70s who they tried to push as a new Haystacks Calhoun, but he never got over) who was 6-11 and 600 pounds. He claimed he flew to Texas to see a match with Thibodeaux and Andre, and how Andre couldn't budge Thibodeaux with any offensive moves, and at the 7:00 mark of total domination, Thibodeaux pinned Andre in the middle of the ring. Of course, no such match happened, but he tried to use Thibodeaux as the big freak instead of Andre in that year's Battle Royal. He made Thibodeaux wear huge lifts in his boots so when he stood next to Ladd, he was a few inches taller than him. The next year, T-John was in a memorable scene in a Battle Royal. Somehow, he shrunk several inches, as he went from being taller than Ladd, who was 6-9, to the same height as Bruiser Brody, who was 6-4 1/2. Brody came in to dominate the Battle Royal, and worked so fast with T-John that he slumped into the corner and threw up all over the corner of the ring. Andre was in California every January for the Los Angeles Battle Royal, but he never worked for Shire again.

In 1979, after Shire was down to promoting only at the Cow Palace, Terry Garvin, who had worked prelims on-and-off for years in San Francisco and worked in the Amarillo office, figured there was a load of good cities starved for wrestling. He got television in several cities and planned a tour. Shire apparently threatened Dick Murdoch, who owned the Amarillo office with Blackjack Mulligan at the time, warning him to stay out of his territory. Murdoch actually went on television and talked about coming to San Jose and getting a phone call threatening him, never using Shire's name, but using the term that he was threatened by a call who told him to stay out of his territory, indicating it was Shire. Murdoch cut a promo on the guy who threatened him. As it turned out, the Amarillo based shows drew poorly and were gone relatively quickly. After retiring, it seemed this giant of the industry would never be heard from again. But he was furious at the NWA for not protecting his territory like they had so many other promoters. He became a key witness for Jim Wilson in his lawsuit against Barnett, claiming he was told by Barnett not to use Wilson because he was trouble, that the NWA blacklisted talent (ironically, Shire himself attempted to do so without success to the Great Mephisto and Buddy Rose after they crossed him, but because he never had the power of someone like Eddie Graham, he was never able to get it done), and even testified that Barnett had made Tommy Rich the world champion in 1980 in exchange for sexual favors. That had been a widely talked about rumor, because whenever a young good-looking guy got a super push from a gay promoter, those kind of rumors would get started. Rich was so young when he got the title (the youngest in NWA history, and third youngest major world champion ever at the time besides Lou Thesz and Danno O'Mahoney), even though it was only for a few days. Virtually nobody around the Georgia scene believed the story. His depositions for Wilson were crucial, and because of his position as a power-broker and former Vice President, testifying to everything Wilson claimed including that he was told not to use Wilson, it could cost Barnett and Georgia Championship Wrestling, who Wilson sued,

huge amounts of money. But by the time the case came up, McMahon had purchased Georgia Championship Wrestling and folded it. Even though Barnett was McMahon's Director of Operations, essentially the No. 2 business person in the company, Barnett, because he lived such a lavish lifestyle, was nearly broke.

In 1984, when Vince McMahon expanded into Sacramento and San Francisco, Shire went to several major newspapers and television stations and explained all the secrets of pro wrestling. McMahon and Verne Gagne were furious that Shire "exposed the business," talked about the secrets of booking, blading and even drug use within the industry, particularly an article in the Los Angeles Times that got significant national attention.

When asked why, Shire said, "I was backstabbed by a couple guys I thought were my friends. They didn't keep their word to me. I defended wrestling for 33 years, but why should I defend guys who sold me out." The names he mentioned he was trying to get back at were McMahon, LeBelle, Gagne and Nomellini.

"If I can stomp on 'em, I will. They stomped on me."

Ironically Shire's revelations that he thought would kill their business, had no effect at all. And he went back to his ranch and lived a quiet life the next several years, a man who was a major power in the industry for two decades ended up largely gone and forgotten.

Long after the heyday, Stevens was fondly remembered by everyone. He returned to California in 1995 after suffering a heart attack while living in Minnesota. He underwent quadruple bypass surgery at Stanford University. On April 5, 1995, the cities of both San Francisco and Oakland jointly declared Ray Stevens Day in the Bay Area. He joked with Red Bastien that he had lived the life of ten men, "and that was by 1958." Unlike Shire, Stevens had long since spent everything he made, and was living with his first wife, former wrestling star from the Billy Wolfe/Mildred Burke era, Grace Patton (who wrestled as was known to everyone in wrestling as Therese Theis). He was told by doctors he needed to tone down his drinking and smoking. He took that as a sign to increase it, because there were sayings in wrestling, about how Ray Stevens had nine lives, and that "God takes care of those who don't care take of themselves, little children, small animals and Ray Stevens."

Stevens passed away from a heart attack at the age of 60, on May 3, 1996 at Patton's home in Fremont, CA, leaving in his wake the history of a business in his part of the country. It seemed like every wrestler in the area congregated at Stevens' funeral.

"God love him. He was still smoking and drinking until the day he went," said Nick Bockwinkel, whose tag team with Stevens in the early 70s was generally considered the best in the business. "He loved toys. He always had to have the fastest snowmobile, fastest boat, fastest car. He was always upbeat. He was never jealous. If Ray Stevens said a bad word about someone, they obviously deserved it."

Shire fell ill and was rushed to the hospital on September 10, 1992. He suffered a mild heart attack six days later while still in the hospital. He died four days later, after suffering a massive heart attack, at the age of 71. He had made millions. He had made careers of some of the biggest stars in the industry, taught the concept of logical booking to people who then shaped the future of the industry, taught the psychology of wrestling to numerous Hall of Famers and largely was responsible for the concept that, 28 years after he ran his final show, is the second biggest PPV event every year. Yet his death went virtually unacknowledged in the industry, and none of those same people attended his funeral.

ROY SHIRE'S MOST FAMOUS COW PALACE SHOWS

March, 4, 1961 (Shire's first event at the Cow Palace): Argentina Rocca vs. Don Leo Jonathan; Bill Melby vs. Mitsu Arakawa; Ray Stevens vs. Cowboy Bob Ellis (16,533 fans; 1,600 over capacity)

July 15, 1961: Stevens vs. Arakawa battle of heels for U.S. title (13,734)

November 11, 1961: Stevens vs. Cowboy Bob Ellis for U.S. title (15,961 standing room)

January 13, 1962: Stevens vs. Wilbur Snyder for U.S. title (17,061, standing room, thousands turned away)

February 17, 1962: Stevens vs. Bobo Brazil for U.S. title (17,075 standing room/large amount turned away)

March 17, 1962: Stevens vs. Hercules Cortez for U.S. title (14,462 sellout)

April 7, 1962: Stevens vs. Wilbur Snyder for U.S. title (13,920)

May 5, 1962: Stevens vs. Hercules Cortez for U.S. title (14,937 sellout)

June 2, 1962: Stevens & Don Manoukian (former Oakland Raider/Stanford lineman) vs. Kinji Shibuya & Mitsu Arakawa for world tag team titles in battle of heels (14,460 sellout)

June 30, 1962: Stevens vs. Bearcat Wright for U.S. title (15,570 overflow/turnaway)

July 16, 1962: Stevens & Manoukian vs. Shibuya & Arakawa for world tag team title (14,000)

November 10, 1962: Stevens vs. Pepper Gomez for U.S. title (15,540 overflow/turnaway)

January 26, 1963: Stevens vs. Pepper Gomez for U.S. title (16,473/overflow, 1,500 turned away)

February 23, 1963: Stevens vs. Pepper Gomez for U.S. title (17,130 all-time record in the building, 8,000 turned away)

November 9, 1963: Stevens vs. Domenic DeNucci for U.S. title (13,648)

January 25, 1963: Stevens vs. Domenic DeNucci vs. U.S. title (13,506)

July 15, 1967: Stevens vs. Bruno Sammartino for U.S. and WWWF title where Stevens won via count out and was declared champion but title change was never recognized by WWWF (11,539)

November 11, 1967: Battle Royal (won by Bearcat Wright, pinning Ray Stevens) plus Patterson & Stevens & Freddie Blassie vs. Pepper Gomez & Pedro Morales & Cyclone Negro (16,000/overflow/turnaway)

November 9, 1968: Battle Royal (won by Big Bill Miller, pinning Don Leo Jonathan) plus Gene Kiniski vs. Fred Curry for NWA world title (15,000 sellout)

March 15, 1969: First Patterson vs. Stevens singles match at the Cow Palace after Stevens had turned babyface in feud with Big Bill Miller (13,012)

November 15, 1969: Battle Royal (won by Ray Stevens over Bill Miller); Dory Funk Jr. vs. Kinji Shibuya for World title (16,000 overflow/turnaway)

December 6, 1969: Patterson vs. Stevens for U.S. title (14,000 sellout)

July 11, 1970: Patterson vs Stevens for U.S. title in Texas death match with Haystacks Calhoun as referee (16,500 overflow/turnaway)

July 10, 1971: Paul DeMarco retains the U.S. title in a Texas death match over Ray Stevens signifying the end of the Stevens era as the area's top star (12,000)

January 22, 1972: Battle Royal (Ray Stevens threw out Pat Patterson); Stevens & Pepper Gomez & Rocky Johnson & Peter Maivia vs. Patterson & Paul DeMarco & Haru Sasaki & Ripper Collins (16,000 overflow/turnaway)

January 27, 1973: Battle Royal (Great Mephisto pinned Haystacks Calhoun); Ray Stevens & Pat Patterson & Rocky Johnson vs. Lars Anderson & Luke Graham & Great Mephisto (13,785)

April 28, 1973: Pat Patterson steals Great Mephisto's loaded boot and wears it, using stumps to the head to regain the U.S. title (12,000)

December 29, 1973: Lonnie "Moondog" Mayne wins U.S. title from Pat Patterson in a Texas death match that was one of the city's best matches of the decade (12,517)

January 26, 1974: Battle Royal (Peter Maivia pinned Moondog Mayne) (15,662 sellout/turnaway)

February 15, 1975: Battle Royal (Pat Patterson eliminated Karl Von Brauner); Patterson & Andre the Giant & Peter Maivia vs. Moondog Mayne & Kurt Von Brauner & Dutch Savage (13,709)

January 24, 1976: Battle Royal (Mr. Fuji threw out Ray Stevens after throwing salt in his eyes); Pat Patterson & Ray Stevens vs. Don Muraco & Masa Saito (14,787 sellout)

January 22, 1977: Battle Royal (Andre the Giant threw out Alexia Smirnoff) (14,000)

February 12, 1977: Pat Patterson wins U.S. title in Gladiator Death match over Toru Tanaka, billed as Mr. Fuji, with both men wearing masks (12,000)

October 22, 1977: First Bob Roop vs. Kevin Sullivan match where Roop gave Sullivan's "father" a shoulderbreaker (12,350)

November 12, 1977: Bob Roop vs. Kevin Sullivan for U.S. title (14,000)

December 3, 1977: Bob Roop vs. Kevin Sullivan for U.S. title (13,800)

January 28, 1978: Battle Royal (Don Muraco pinned Moondog Mayne); Harley Race vs. Chavo Guerrero for NWA world title; Muraco vs. Dory Funk Jr. (16,000 sellout/turnaway)

January 27, 1979: Battle Royal (Ron Starr threw out Harley Race); Race vs. Ron Starr for NWA world title (12,000)

January 26, 1980: Battle Royal (Ray Stevens threw out Ernie Ladd); Harley Race vs. Stevens for NWA world title (10,000)

January 24, 1981: Shire's last card, Battle Royal (Pat Patterson threw out Dick Slater) (6,400)